

LETTER

TO

LORD VISCOUNT PALMERSTON

ON

MEDICAL REFORM

BY

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PRESENTED
by the
AUTHOR.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

MDCCCLVII

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
LORD VISCOUNT PALMERSTON.

MY LORD,

ANOTHER Session of Parliament has closed, and we have no Medical Reform. Why? Not, surely, because of the unwillingness of your Lordship's Government, nor of other Governments with which your Lordship has been connected, nor of the Legislature, to entertain the subject of Medical Reform; but because of its having been again, as formerly, presented to your notice in a false aspect, and beset with difficulties created solely by the very parties who are, and have been, seeking your assistance and protection.

Like the drafts of all Bills previously introduced, those of the last session point more to the adjusting of differences in the profession itself, and to the reconciling of irreconcilable interests, about which doctors had better be left to fight, than to the interests and wellbeing of the community, which it is the imperative duty of its rulers to study and promote. It has unfortunately happened that those of my profession who have hitherto exerted themselves the most in favour of what has been called Medical Reform, have been either teachers of medical science, or active leaders in some one of the medical corporations; they have thus been led to regard the subject from a peculiar, and, I may be pardoned for adding, a somewhat selfish point of view. I address your

Lordship simply in the character of one who has practised his profession for more than a quarter of a century, and whose mental perception, such as it is, has not been clouded by having interests separate from those of the profession and the public. I plead guilty to having in some measure interested myself in the subject of Medical Reform in the College to which I belong, and I have had a preference for some Bills over others, as I had for that of Lord Elcho over that of Mr Headlam last session ; but the fate of these measures has more and more strengthened my belief that then, as on all former occasions, too much was attempted, and that, notwithstanding the assurances given to your Lordship that the profession were nearly agreed as to what was most expedient should be made law, the doctors were as far from unanimity as ever ; and I feel that it ought to nerve any man who may, on the part of the Government, contemplate the introduction into Parliament of a new measure, that he is relieved from the apprehension of his work meeting the approval of “ all whom it may concern.”

Your Lordship would not thank me were I to recapitulate the various means by which drafts of Bills have been originated and advanced, because your Lordship’s courtesy must have made you a considerable sufferer on that head ; and you have no doubt discovered that, if the consideration of loaves and fishes were disposed of, the whole question might be easily settled. And so it might be—I venture to say so it would be ; but I hope to prove that there are interests at stake of greater importance to the profession and the public, and much more worthy the consideration of a statesman, than the mere pecuniary interest of any corporation or university, however old or distinguished. A more careful perusal of the Bills hitherto introduced into Parliament than they are likely to have received at the hands of our senators, fails to suggest to my

mind the idea of their clauses having been framed with a view to the wants of the community, far less can I discover that any direct remedy has been sought to be applied to the known privation under which the poor of the land suffer; for, indeed, the passing of any one of these measures must inevitably have led (in some districts of the country at least) to the utter annihilation of even the present scanty and miserably inefficient medical superintendence, whilst it would have rendered hopeless the substitution of a better.

In the year 1850 the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh instituted an inquiry as to the existing deficiency of medical practitioners in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, and in 1852 a Report was submitted to the college by Dr Coldstream, the able and zealous convener of the committee appointed for the purpose, and this Report was forwarded to several members of Her Majesty's Government.

That Report contains the following statements: "Sixty-two parishes are adequately supplied with medical practitioners, 52 partially supplied, and 41 *rarely if ever visited by any regular practitioner*. By the census of 1841, the 41 destitute parishes contain a population of 34,361. From a few parishes there are complaints of there being not even a midwife.

"With regard to the position of the medical men who practise in or near the imperfectly supplied districts, the following facts have been ascertained:—

"That of 53 of these, from whom returns have been received, 12 have been in practice for ten years, or between ten and twenty years; 12 for twenty years, or between twenty and thirty years; 8 for thirty years, and 1 for fifty-six years. Most of these gentlemen report the length of their ordinary daily rounds at from three to fourteen miles, and their greatest distances at from ten to one hundred

miles ; almost all travel on horseback generally ; 16 make use of wheeled conveyances partially, and 17 are obliged to take boats daily. Three only report the entire absence of roads in the district which they traverse, and these are in Orkney and Shetland ; 7 complain of the roads being very bad, but by all the others the state of the roads is said to be excellent. With regard to the status presently enjoyed by the Highland practitioners compared with what it was some years ago, 26 report it as unchanged, 15 as being improved (chiefly under the operation of the new Poor-Law), and only 12 as being worse than it was ; but so many as 28 complain of the great inadequacy of the remuneration received : in some places, two-thirds of the people pay nothing ; in others, the proportion of gratis to paying patients is as 19 to 1. Only 4 gentlemen state that they have no complaint to make ; all the rest appear to regard their lot as a hard one ; and complain, some of the hardships and dangers to which they are necessarily exposed in travelling great distances by sea and land in all weathers, over bad roads and in crazy boats ; others, of the want of improving society ; others, of the interference of unqualified practitioners ; and a few, of the harsh treatment they experience at the hands of the parochial authorities.

“ There are probably few men in any situation who undergo greater hardships in the discharge of professional duty, so continuously, and with so little respect of reward, than do these Highland practitioners. Many of them appear to be actuated by true philanthropy—doing their best, in the most unfavourable possible circumstances, to manifest the benevolent spirit of their profession, and to confer the blessings of its science on the poorest of our fellow-countrymen. Strong testimony is borne by several of the reporters to their indefatigable, zealous, and self-denying labours, and much regret is expressed that they are, for the most part, very poorly

remunerated. 'I must state,' writes one clergyman, "that I know no class of men more extensively or more actively charitable than medical practitioners in the Highlands.' Another remarks : ' I know of no class of men more inadequately remunerated than the medical practitioners of the Highlands, or who obtain a livelihood at a greater sacrifice of time and of labour.'

" The following practical inferences may be drawn from the facts and statements contained in the returns :—

" 1. That in several districts, and these, perhaps, scattered pretty equally over the whole range of the Highlands and Islands, there is such a lack of medical aid as exposes the people in these districts to the risk of far greater suffering and fatality than are experienced amongst their more highly-favoured fellow-countrymen in the south.

" 2. According to the population returns of 1841, the number of persons who never receive, and cannot, without great expense, at any time receive the benefit of medical aid, amounts to about 34,300 ; while those who receive it occasionally are in number about 90,000, making a total of 124,300 persons inadequately supplied. Doubtless, the numbers of these are almost daily becoming less by emigration ; but it may be presumed that about 116,000 people, scattered over wide and rugged districts, are at this moment most imperfectly provided for in sickness.

" 3. This destitution is at once a consequence and a proof of the miserably-depressed social state of the Highlands."

Truly it were a blessing unspeakable did the profession betray such self-denying qualities as would induce them to surrender themselves to the gratuitous service of their country, and, despite the labour, the anxiety, and the heavy expense bestowed in acquiring or mastering not only the science of medicine, but the collateral sciences, did resign themselves cheerfully to the toils and perils of a country

surgeon's life, on the average wages of a London coachman, or of a tolerably accomplished French cook. But until the symptoms of such a regeneration appear, it is vain to talk of limiting the profession to such only as can attain to proficiency in branches of study apart from, and in addition to, those which pertain strictly to the art of healing.

It is long since the tide set in, in the medical profession, in favour of the addition of endless branches of study, all valuable in themselves, all praiseworthy in those who would be exercised thereby, and indispensable, it is to be hoped, in him who would rise to distinction in his profession, or would make his society coveted by his fellow-men ; but such should not be demanded of those who are destined for a limited but laborious and ill-requited sphere of professional usefulness, who at present too often attain to a mere smattering of general information, at the expense of a thorough and practical acquaintance with those particular branches of knowledge, upon which their usefulness in life and the well-being of society mainly depend. It has been too much the fashion with many learned men, to some of whom it may have been of little consequence whether they obtained their licences in five or in ten years, to maintain that medical students cannot have their minds too richly stored with varied learning ; and they are encouraged to urge this view by the occasional appearances of pupils whose minds are equal to the task assigned them ; but those who have long had to do with the practice of the profession, know well, as men of ordinary understanding will believe, that such cases are exceptional, and that the number of years which it is in the power of a large majority of persons, who look to the practice of the profession as a means of subsistence (for rarely can it be said of profit), to give to study, is barely sufficient to enable them to acquire proficiency in the branches of knowledge, a familiarity with which is essential to their own happiness and their patients' welfare.

Your Lordship will please to observe that I am not now dealing with honours in medicine ; I am dealing with the extent of professional knowledge to be required of those who would propose to treat disease as recognised and qualified practitioners ; and it is with all such that the State, for the protection of the public, ought to busy itself.

What do those magnates in my profession, who have for years been dinning into the ears of your Lordship the necessity for Medical Reform, really expect to accomplish by legislative enactment ? Are they to rear a race of physicians skilled in all languages, living and dead, perfect masters of logic and metaphysics, adepts in all the sciences and pundits in all the ologies, and then invite them to settle down in the remoter districts of our country and its dependencies, achieving, by means of all this learning, what is poetically called an honest independence, which, being translated into the vernacular, means somewhat less than £150 per annum, garnished with the vulgar vituperation of parochial boards ? In an important and populous county adjoining that of Edinburgh, where the tax upon incomes of £150 a-year was, some time ago, first established, only one medical practitioner was found to possess an income large enough to bring him under the operation of the law.

Do they really believe that our legislators are so ignorant of the first principles of political economy, as to imagine that there is any true wisdom in creating a supply antecedent to the demand ? I say emphatically that there is no want of doctors of this description ; but there is a demand extensively felt both at home and abroad, and in our public services, for men of a different stamp—the rough-and-ready practitioner—the man who, not having expended a fortune in the preparation for the exercise of his profession, can afford to rest satisfied with a very limited income, and to whom the intercourse with civilised society is not a necessity of existence. These are the men whom alone it is neces-

sary for our rulers to create, and whose fitness they are bound to secure. As absurd would it be to send silks and satins to clothe the inhabitants of the outlying districts of our rural population, as to provide the same people with medical attendants of high intellectual refinement, polished manners, and varied acquirements. The whole object and aim of the various measures which the Legislature has hitherto been asked to sanction, appear to be to increase the difficulties of entering the profession, to elevate the most subordinate branches to a degree incompatible with its humbler duties, and thus still further to increase that destitution of medical aid in our poorer districts which is already so lamentably apparent.

To take this more limited view of ministerial duty you can never be advised by corporations, who, if they be physicians, tell you that surgeons ought not to teach medicine and examine thereanent; if surgeons, that physicians know nothing of surgery; and if they be both, that universities, some of which have taught and examined in Medicine for centuries, and in Surgery for a long period, ought not to be permitted to license in either,—endeavouring to establish distinctions throughout the mass of the profession, which, however suited to the tastes, tempers, and pockets of many, ought to be discouraged among the thousands who have to treat indiscriminately cases in Medicine, Surgery, and Midwifery.

Bills have at various times been introduced into Parliament calculated to aggrandise some of the corporations and universities at the expense of others, and these have met favour accordingly. Few members of these bodies ever made a study of their provisions; the mass of the profession never had an opportunity of seeing them, far less of studying them; and some of their champions, if they ever studied them, plainly did not understand them; whilst it is now well

known that, even in the metropolis itself, many names were adhibited to petitions in favour of the Bill of Mr Headlam, in the belief that its provisions were those of the Bill of Lord Elcho. One body, indeed, whose delegates, in 1856, prepared in London the most full and explanatory reasons for preferring the measure of Lord Elcho, sent to London in 1857 one of the very same delegates to favour that of Mr Headlam—to which, at the same time, they had endless objections, for no better reason than I can divine, than that it thoroughly ignored the Universities. The British Medical Association, too, a body charging itself with the interests of the profession, petitioned in 1856 for the Bill of Lord Elcho after it had passed the Committee; and in 1857 the same learned and consistent individuals, on the Bill being reintroduced, petitioned for the Bill of Mr Headlam.

It is possible, though barely supposable, that the endeavour by Mr Headlam to compel all licentiates to connect themselves with colleges, a cruel and oppressive impost, may have had some influence in converting their minds and directing their steps.

Your Lordship is too sagacious an observer of human nature not to have seen that among the various bodies who were, during the last session of Parliament, represented as favourable to the Bill of Mr Headlam, only a few were really in earnest, a larger number giving a reluctant concurrence, because they feared their corporate interests would otherwise be endangered, and nicely proportioning the amount of the support which they contributed to the amount of benefit which they expected to receive in return.

The College of Surgeons of Edinburgh was not successful in its attempt to conceal the real cause of its dislike to the Bill of Lord Elcho, which was the ignorant supposition that it would lessen the number of those who paid admission-fees into its coffers. The London College of Surgeons, again,

though driven at last to a pretended acquiescence in Mr Headlam's Bill, has all along been a great obstruction to Medical Reform ; and the reason of this is obvious. Has your Lordship ever considered to what an extent the cause of Medical Reform might be promoted by pensioning the examiners of this body, who ought not to be expected to surrender what has for many years been a principal source of their income without compensation ?

For the protection of the public, two things are necessary : First, that it be required that no one shall be permitted to take the status of a practitioner in Medicine, Surgery, and Midwifery, who has not gone through a certain prescribed course of study, and proved his qualification for practice by passing examinations in each of the branches of study required. Secondly, That the public shall be assured as to who are and who are not qualified, through means of a published register ; and, in justice both to the public and the profession, it is necessary that the individuals so registered shall be entitled to practise where they please.

To attain the first, it does not appear to me to be indispensable that the universities, colleges, and private schools should be brought into collision ; nor need they be interfered with at all, so long as they fulfil, by any process of amalgamation among themselves, or by separate corporate action, the training and perfecting of candidates for medical service, civil or military, at home or abroad. Rather confer on all these bodies, hitherto contending for their individual rights and privileges, the power to grant the licences in Medicine, Surgery, and Midwifery, and empower them to do so separately or jointly.

But, my Lord, I would here urge that the minimum age, the length of study, the branches to be acquired, and the order in which they must be taken, should be made the sub-

ject of legislative enactment, and should not be left to the shifting views of an ever-changing medical council ; and a glance at the following table, which contrasts some of the items of the curricula of the colleges with the requirements of the public services, and the demands of the different services with one another, will convince you of the necessity for terminating a state of matters in themselves as absurd and uncalled for, as they are to the student vexatious and expensive ; for unless the latter can rely with certainty on his admission to the service on which, from the outset, he has desired to enter, he finds, as many have done, that with the licence in his possession for that for which he has qualified himself, the door of a kindred service is shut against him, for lack of some three or four months' teaching on a subject with which he has, under examination, been found to be sufficiently well informed.

	Edinburgh M.D.	Edinburgh Surgeon.	Army.	Navy.	East India Company.
Anatomy.....	6 Months.	12 Months.	12 Months.	18 Months.	12 months' Practice of Medicine and 6 months' Clinical Medicine ; or 6 months' Practice of Medicine, and 12 months' Clinical do.
Surgery.....	6 "	12 "	12 "	18 "	
Clinical do.....	3 "	6 "	8 "	6 "	
Practice of Medicine,	6 "	6 "	6 "	12 "	
Clinical do.....	6 "	6 "	8 "	6 "	
Chemistry.....	6 "	6 "	12 "	3 "	
Practical do.....	0 "	3 "	6 "	3 "	

Will it be credited that within the last five or six years the son of one of our most distinguished professors and physicians, of world-wide reputation, having obtained his diploma in Surgery, expressed his desire to enter the medical service of the army, and was assured that, when convenient for him, his application would be favourably entertained ; and that he, having in the interval taken his degree in Medicine, on making formal application for a commission, was informed, that, as he could not produce evidence of his having attended a course of Logic, he was not qualified to enter the medical service of the British army ? The indignation with which

such an announcement was received by one who had with distinction prosecuted a most extended course of study, may be imagined; and it may be unnecessary to intimate that the army was thereby deprived of the services of a gentleman and a scholar, who would have reflected credit on any department of the profession.

That many have since been admitted into the same service with such and much graver defects, is known to all; but those who believe that a man can be made a logician by attending a six months' course of lectures on the subject, any more than that a man can ever be a great physician without having a logical mind by nature, I hold to be past praying for.

There may have been periods in the history of the profession when its practitioners had to rely on their own knowledge of botany, geology, or chemistry, for obtaining the *materiel* with which they had to war against disease; but who, in these times, when every medicine is presented to him in the utmost attainable perfection, and suited for immediate use, will be bold enough to maintain that the result of a case is to be influenced by a man's knowledge of the shape of a leaf of senna, or of the proportion of lime contained in an oyster-shell? As well might it be insisted on, that the success of a lawyer's pleading depended on his knowledge of the manufacture of the paper on which it was written, or of the particular species of goose out of the wing of which his quill was taken. The necessary amount of Chemistry and of Botany to be required for license ought to be communicated, as it generally is, under the branches of *Materia Medica* and Medical Jurisprudence, of which Analytical Chemistry forms an important and interesting department. No doubt a more general acquaintance with such studies is essential to the comfort of a man who would move intelligently in polite society of the present day, whether

he belong to the profession of Divinity, Law, or Physic, or if he belong to no profession ; but what I urge is the greater importance to a surgeon, who may be in a distant colony, of his being able to act as his own Cutler than ^{as} ~~of~~ his own Herbalist. Yet true it is that many students are encouraged to fritter away the best half of the appointed years of study in microscopical investigations of plants and animals and suchlike, and are thus compelled to devote the last year of study to cramming, from books, satisfactory answers on Practical Surgery and Medicine, with which, and which alone, they are let loose upon society to grope their way to skill in the relief of suffering.

It is notorious that a very large majority of those who leave this school are lamentably ignorant of the practice of Physic and Surgery ; and if it be so in a school which stands pre-eminent for the quality of its clinical teaching, the subject may well command the attention of those who propose to reform the profession.

The extent to which illicit medical practice has been fostered under the present system, *and which would be very greatly increased under the proposed more extended curriculum*, and the imposition of fresh burdens on the entrants to the profession, may be gathered from the fact that there exist in the United Kingdom no fewer than one thousand individuals who practise without any licence whatever ; and your Lordship well knows that no principle in political economy has been more perfectly and more profitably established than that which declares, that the over-taxation of any article necessarily leads to the demoralising effects of contraband traffic. It is well known that the largest fortune of late years left in the profession from practice, in a country district in England, was accumulated by one who had no licence.

In shortly addressing myself to the subject of Medical

Honours, whether in the form of Degrees in Medicine, or Fellowships of Colleges, I will yield to none in my appreciation of the value of such honours, which cannot be made too much the objects of ambition with the members of the profession generally ; and I am vain enough of my profession yet to believe, that a large proportion of those who are favourably circumstanced to do so, will covet them, and, by their assiduous and successful cultivation of their profession, press for their attainment ; and it does not appear to me that any important object is to be gained by interfering with the bodies conferring them, further than by abolishing from their charters every syllable calculated to fetter licentiates in the exercise of their calling ; for I contemplate that it will no longer be possible for any college to prevent a regularly-qualified medical licentiate from practising in May-Fair, any more than it will be, I trust, to deny the slate-quarriers of Lord Breadalbane, and the inhabitants of the mountain-wilds of these islands, the benefit of accessible and efficient medical aid.

Let the College of Physicians of London continue to demand, if it wills it, that its entrants shall be twenty-six years of age (or fifty-six, it matters not), and by renewed charters they may be confirmed in the power to repel all who may seek to invade their corporation ; but the public are entitled to the services of those who, at an earlier period of life, through much toil, and often with hardly-earned money, at much expense have satisfied a competent tribunal of their fitness to practise every branch of their difficult and laborious profession, and whilst an Army Medical Board is advertising for medical officers (rather significant of the dearth of qualified candidates), who must not exceed twenty-five years of age, let not the Legislature affirm the impossibility of a man's being fit to practise as a physician till he is over twenty-six years of age.

It would have been very surprising had a profession, the members of which consider nobody safe out of their own hands, and the corporations of which each believe the other to be attempting to rob its neighbours' treasury, been passive, not to say unanimous, on any one point in the great cause of Medical Reform ; but it might have been hoped, though hardly expected, that jealousy of Her Majesty's advisers in the choice of their Executive Council might have escaped them. In *such* hands there must be jobbery forsooth—an evil not at all likely to befall them in the profession itself ; and whilst I have not been fortunate enough to meet with half-a-dozen who are agreed as to the complexion the Council should be made to assume,—*one*, pointing at a representation little short of that in St Stephen's, and *another*, like Mr Headlam, at one more numerous than your Lordship's Cabinet, intrusted with the affairs of this and of every other country—the chief risk of favouritism and fraud is to be found in their approach to the fountain of honour.

Cordially agreeing on this point with the Royal College of Physicians of London, as expressed 23d April 1856, I am decidedly of opinion that the Medical Council should not be very numerous ; and I think your Lordship might overcome the morbid sensitiveness above alluded to, by requiring that each of the Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons of the three divisions of the kingdom shall forward to the Secretary of State the names of two licentiates (not necessarily being members of colleges), from each of which two the Minister shall select one to serve in the Council. With the six so selected, a non-professional member of either House of Parliament might be chosen by the Queen to preside, securing thereby their responsibility to the Legislature and the country.

It is not for one moment to be imagined that this or any

other proposal will meet with anything like general acceptance from the profession, but I throw it out as it occurs to me ; and if it serve no better purpose, it will at least form an additional proof of the endless differences of opinion that prevail, and of the hopelessness of the profession ever settling the question of Medical Reform. But if your Lordship would again lend the aid of your personal influence and powerful Government to rescue us from ourselves, and from some injudicious friends (of our enemies we are not and need not be afraid), you might bring to a successful issue this forty years' war, settle down in comparative peace a profession which, with all its faults, has merited and still claims a large share of its country's consideration, and establish it, through its increased efficiency, on the confidence and respect of the community.

I have the honour to be,

MY LORD,

Your Lordship's obedient Servant,

JOHN G. M. BURT,

Fellow of the Royal College
of Physicians.

EDINBURGH, *8th October* 1857.

